

Embedding, repression and murder: How the US military degraded journalism in Iraq

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The April 8 missile attack on the Baghdad offices of Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV, as well as the tankfire directed at the Palestine Hotel, residence of the non-embedded press corps, is the culmination of the criminal efforts of the US army to silence all independent reporting of its bloody massacre of Iraqi civilians and militia.

The deaths of three newsmen—Tariq Ayoub, Taras Protsyuk and Jose Cuoso—prompted protests worldwide and led to several journalists denouncing the US actions as tantamount to murder.

Sky News correspondent David Chater asked pointedly in the *Independent*, “How are we supposed to carry on if American shells are targeting Western Journalists?” The paper’s own columnist Robert Fisk asked, “Is there some element in the US military that wants to take out journalists?”

There is nothing exaggerated in such responses. The claim by the Pentagon that the attack on three separate sources of independent journalism in one day was accidental is beneath contempt. The Bush administration has done everything it can to prevent any honest reporting of the war against Iraq and in the process have mounted repeated bombings of media installations, arrested and physically beaten reporters and had already been accused of deliberately killing reporters prior to April 8.

The most high-profile case up until this past week was that of the non-embedded ITV News correspondent Terry Lloyd, who was killed on March 22 by US troops in Southern Iraq.

Cameraman Daniel Demoustier, who was injured in the same incident, has said that US tanks opened fire on the ITN team after it came into contact with a group of Iraqi soldiers who were seeking to surrender. He has said the attack was deliberate in order to “wipe out troublesome witnesses”.

Still missing are Fred Nerac, the French cameraman who accompanied Lloyd, and the Lebanese translator, Hussein Osman.

ITN has accused the British and American governments of hiding the truth about Lloyd’s death. Chief executive Stewart Purvis said, “We’re now clear that somebody in the American or British military knows what happened next but they have not come forward.”

Nerac’s wife, Fabienne, has asked US Secretary of State Colin Powell to account for her husband’s whereabouts during a news conference in Brussels, Belgium. She has been supported by French President Jacques Chirac.

Other high profile cases of suppression include the sacking of Peter Arnett by NBC on March 31, following a right-wing witchhunt because he gave an interview to Iraqi TV. The Pentagon also insisted that Fox journalist Geraldo Rivera be sent home for allegedly revealing the plans of a military unit in Iraq in advance and US forces expelled Phil Smucker of the Boston-based *Christian Science Monitor* from Iraq for allegedly being too specific in a report.

What is less reported is the routine suppression involved in the policy of “embedding” and the undemocratic, hostile and sometimes brutal nature

of the US treatment of non-embedded journalists.

Embedded journalists number around 600 and are both under the control of the military and predisposed towards friendly and non-controversial reporting.

The policy was drawn up by Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, who described it with some candour as “self-serving”. Under the Pentagon’s 50 pages of guidelines, embedded correspondents are forbidden to report any information that would undermine or compromise the US offensive, including reports of military and civilian casualties. Not only did journalists have to agree to this, but they were sucked in to life with the troops and an identification with them both conscious or unconscious.

Journalists, once accepted for embedding, have no right to leave. By the later stages of the war, however, many journalists did want to leave but Colonel Jay DeFrank of the Department of Defence explained why this was unacceptable: “A lot of the reporting is based on getting into the [combat] environment and getting to know people. You don’t get it if you step in as a casual observer.”

There is little wonder that embedding is often cynically referred to as being “in bed” with the military.

The April 7 *Guardian*’s media section published a revealing account by one independent journalist, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.

He explains:

“There are 1,670 unembedded journalists, or unilaterals, in Kuwait—sent to cover a war to which they have virtually no access.... Like many news organisations, mine wanted unilaterals alongside embeds. You can’t cover a war from a tank turret alone. How can you build a wider picture? How do you gain an Iraqi perspective? How do you tell the stories that the coalition would rather remain hidden?”

“Yet just a handful get even close to the story. As evasive routes to the north are discovered, new roadblocks and obstacles shut them down. Those that get through to the borders hunker down in safe houses, a tight-knit community dodging border police, contemplating their next move: into Iraq.”

When he finally got into Iraq after a week, he was still forced to surmount military restrictions on contact with the Iraqis. He explains, “Southern Iraq is a lawless place right now. But that fact—a given in war—is used as an excuse to control journalists. The deaths of Terry Lloyd and his ITN team are cited as a reason for keeping us out. A British military spokesman here told me that the deaths proved why non-embeds must stay away. That feels like a vulgar justification of censorship and control.... The sources of control are Washington and London. A Whitehall press minder is with Britain’s military spokesman at all times. His word is law. Rules are bent for non-embeds who are trusted to offer up feelgood stories. More aggressively inquisitive media are routinely blocked.”

The anonymous journalist concludes by explaining that “the broadcast

networks are complicit. With their embedded teams producing great visuals, what need is there for broader analysis from the battlefield.... ITN, Sky and the BBC all belong to an exclusive club: the Forward Transmission Unit, based just inside Iraq and attached to the military, which allows a select few correspondents to package the war.”

Those not in this exclusive club are routinely discriminated against and can face severe sanction.

The actions of the US military have provoked a number of official protests. Following the death of Lloyd, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) demanded an inquiry “into how a press vehicle, clearly marked, can be subject to such an attack” and urged US troops and their allies to protect all media staff covering the Iraq war, including those not formally travelling under military protection. “It is not acceptable to create a privileged group of so-called ‘embedded’ journalists and to ignore the needs of other journalists from all around the world,” it said.

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) said that British and US forces give preference to embedded reporters while freezing out independents. EBU Head of News Tony Naets said, “They have created a caste system with embedded journalists—usually from countries in the so-called coalition who can associate with the troops—and the truly unilateral broadcaster who is prevented from coming anywhere near the news.”

EBU Secretary General Jean Stock said April 2, “Reporters and camera crews who put their lives at risk have been detained by American and British troops and returned to Kuwait.”

Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) complained about such detentions and one incident in particular. “Many journalists have come under fire, others have been detained and questioned for several hours and some have been mistreated, beaten and humiliated by coalition forces,” said RSF secretary general, Robert Menard.

He was referring to the fate of four independent reporters who were arrested by US military police as they slept near an American unit 100 miles south of Baghdad and held overnight. Israelis Dan Scemama and Boaz Bismuth and Luis Castro and Victor Silva from Portugal say they were mistreated and denied contact with their families.

“The US soldiers said we were terrorists and spies and treated us as such,” said Scemama. “They want all the journalists in Iraq to have one of their liaison officers with them to supervise the footage they are broadcasting. There is no doubt that this is why they treated us so cruelly.”

Five MPs had jumped on one of his Portuguese colleagues, after he begged to be allowed to speak to his wife and children. “They knocked him to the ground, kicked him, stepped on him, tied him up and threw him back into the camp. He came back half an hour later. He was crying like a child,” said Scemama, who added that he was himself threatened with being shot.

There is another aspect of the RSF’s criticisms of the US Army that bears directly on the subsequent bombing of the Palestine Hotel.

The organisation points to the bombing of the Iraqi Ministry of Information in Baghdad on March 29 and then again on March 30, which destroyed the international media’s base on the building’s roof. Journalists had left the building just one hour before the missile strikes and subsequently refused to go to the ministry building—hence the shifting by the Iraqi regime of briefings to the Palestine Hotel.

The BBC’s Andrew Gilligan noted in the *Mail on Sunday* that the Iraqi ministers would “shift their press conferences to another room at the last minute in case the Americans should try a lucky shot.

“Then they lock us in. Not just to make sure we take down every syllable of overblown rhetoric, but as another safeguard against that inconvenient cruise missile strike—and to stop us seeing the way they leave.”

It now appears that the “lucky shot”, when it came, came in the form of tankfire rather than a cruise missile.

The US is by no means alone in its overt hostility to any expression of independent journalism. As usual the Blair government has been there to lend moral support and provide the necessary political justification for Washington’s more naked efforts at suppression.

Amongst the more high profile attacks made on journalists is that by Defence Minister Geoff Hoon against Robert Fisk of the *Independent*, who he accused of being a dupe of Saddam Hussein’s regime for revealing evidence that two bombings of Iraqi markets had been carried out by the US and not Iraq.

Home Secretary David Blunkett made a more sweeping attack on April 2, not only on media outlets for treating reports from Baghdad “as though they were the moral equivalent” of reports based on information given by the US and UK allied forces, but on the “progressive and liberal” public that believe their reports.

Blunkett said Saddam was exploiting the “weaknesses of our democracy, the weaknesses of our media systems”—“Those of a progressive, or liberal bent, in my view, are egged on into believing that this is the right way to get to the true facts.”

Not to be outdone, the commander of the British forces in the Gulf, Air Marshal Brian Burridge, accused the media of “losing the plot” over the war on Iraq. He railed in the right-wing *Telegraph* newspaper, “You stand for nothing, you support nothing, you criticise, you drip.”

Stewart Purvis of ITN responded by noting how senior British military commanders invariably misunderstood the role of the media and expected them to be “cheerleaders” in any conflict.

“They all think they belong to some sort of UK PLC and ask you ‘don’t you belong to that too?’ It amazes me that very senior officers don’t understand the difference between the army being part of the state and journalists’ role to be independent of the state and report on it.”

The independence of journalism from the state is the crux of what is posed by the war in Iraq. The philosopher Edmond Burke, and after him the historian Thomas Carlyle, famously advanced the concept of the media as the “fourth estate” that acts as a check on the three official branches of the state—the executive, legislature and the judiciary. Today the state power cannot and will not tolerate even a minimal check on its excesses.

The independence of the media has already been largely eliminated for the duration of the Iraqi conflict. Most news organisations have accepted this without complaint and those who object have been subject to sustained pressure to fall into line. This will only whet the appetites of the ruling elite in Washington and London for more of the same. For if the news organisations are prepared to accept such a degree of control in Iraq, then they will be asked to do the same in the interests of the so-called “war against terrorism” at home.



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